

Hepatitis b infection: an overview



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HEPATITIS B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis B virus. Chronic hepatitis B is a long-term infection of the liver that can sometimes develop after a bout of acute or short term, hepatitis B.

How does a person get hepatitis B?

The virus that causes hepatitis B is spread through contact with infected blood or other body fluids of people who have hepatitis B. For example, you can get hepatitis B by having unprotected sex with an infected person.

People who use intravenous drugs can get hepatitis B when they share needles with someone who has the virus. Health care workers, such as nurses, lab technicians and doctors, can get these infections if they are accidentally stuck with a needle that was used on an infected patient.

Pregnant women who are infected with hepatitis B can also pass the virus on to their babies. Hepatitis B cannot be transmitted through casual contact. For example, you cannot get hepatitis B by hugging or shaking hands with someone who is infected.

How long does it take chronic hepatitis to develop after acute hepatitis B?

The time between the acute illness and signs of chronic hepatitis B varies. It may take a short time, or it may be years after the acute infection before chronic hepatitis B develops.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

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Blood tests are used to diagnose hepatitis B. Blood tests can tell your doctor whether your liver is working properly, and they can also be used to follow your condition during treatment. Your doctor may want to look at your liver with an ultrasound exam or x-rays. A liver biopsy may also be needed. With a liver biopsy, a small piece of the liver is removed through a needle and looked at under a microscope. A liver biopsy can help your doctor diagnose your illness and see the condition of your liver directly.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

The symptoms of hepatitis B are: nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, jaundice (the skin turns yellow), weakness, fatigue, or brown urine (may look like tea),

Symptoms of hepatitis B can range from mild to severe. If you have a mild case of hepatitis, you may not even realize that you have it. It may not cause symptoms or may only cause symptoms similar to the stomach flu.

What are the complications of chronic hepatitis B?

People with chronic hepatitis B may not have any symptoms at all. In some people, chronic hepatitis can lead to cirrhosis of the liver. Cirrhosis occurs when the liver cells die and are replaced by scar tissue and fat. The damaged areas of the liver stop working and can't cleanse the body of wastes. The early stages of cirrhosis may not have symptoms, but the following symptoms may arise as cirrhosis gets worse and more of the liver is damaged: weight loss, fatigue, jaundice, nausea, vomiting, or loss of appetite. Cirrhosis can lead to liver failure and even liver cancer.

If you have hepatitis B, you are also susceptible to hepatitis D (also called "Delta agent"). Hepatitis D can only develop in people who already have hepatitis B. It can make your symptoms of hepatitis B or liver disease worse. It is spread through contact with infected blood or other body fluids of people who have hepatitis D.

How is chronic hepatitis B treated?

If you have chronic hepatitis B, your family physician will probably refer you to a gastroenterologist or other subspecialist that treats people with chronic liver problems. There are a number of medical treatments available that are often successful. These include Interferon alfa-2b and other antiviral medicines. Treatment may take a year or more, depending on the severity of the infection and the response to treatment.

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is to have protected sex (use a condom) and to avoid sharing needles.

A vaccine is available to prevent hepatitis B. It is now routinely given in the first year of life to all newborn infants. It is safe and requires 3 shots over a 6-month period. This vaccine should be given to people who are at high risk for this illness, such as health care workers, all children, drug users, people who get tattoos or body piercing, and those with multiple sex partners.

(Hepatitis B, 2007a) (Hepatitis B, 2007b) (Viral hepatitis B, 2007)

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